

Blueberries sell year-round, if explosion-dried

PHILADELPHIA — Engineers here "explode" blueberries. Then, after a year or more, they restore exploded blueberries to near fresh form. The patented process, according to its inventors, has the potential of expanding markets for the North American blueberry.

Almost all blueberries, wild or cultivated, grow on this continent. The fruit is popular when in season; and in Europe and elsewhere, people pay high prices for blueberries. However, supplying enough blueberries to consumers here or abroad is difficult. The harvest season is only six weeks in spring.

Fresh blueberries are highly perishable. And, extending the "selling season" via drying or freezing has not been as effective as with other fruits.

Post-harvest research scientists with USDA's Agricultural Research Service here say that explosion-drying is the best way to store and ship commercial blueberries. USDA's large-scale prototype of an explosion-drying machine saves 40 percent of the

energy required by conventional food drying systems. The explosion-dryer machine dries many types of fruits and vegetables. To date, onions and carrots are explosion-dried commercially.

Here is how explosion-drying works. Inside a heated chamber, heavy pressure is exerted on small batches of blueberries at a time. As pressure is suddenly released, water in the blueberries literally explodes from the fruit. Each explosion-dried batch, popping from the machine at regular beats, looks like soft, blue gravel. Explosion-dried blueberries are porous, slightly puffed and crunchy making them a good snack food. Add boiling water, however, and the "blue gravel" is restored to a form surprisingly close to fresh blueberries.

Reconstituted, explosion-dried or-puffed fruits and vegetables retain the flavor and texture of fresh fruit better than fruit dried by other means.

Research chemical engineers John Sullivan, who helped design and build USDA's explosion-dryer,

says the process could solve two blueberry marketing problems.

"First, growers would no longer need to sell their entire fresh blueberry crop at peak season low prices. Growers' cooperatives could explosion-dry part of their crop in order to extend sales throughout the season.

Secondly, for distributors and sellers explosion-drying is a good alternative to canning

freezing." Freezing, the most popular blueberry preserving method, is energy-intensive and expensive. Also, the shelf life of frozen commercial blueberries is only six months, after which they become "woody or gritty," Sullivan says. Explosion-dried blueberries are both cheaper to produce and of higher quality than either canned or frozen blueberries.

The Georgia Blueberry Association supplied blueberries to ERRC for recent explosion-drying experiments. Encouraged by the results, the Association, in cooperation with the Georgia State Coastal Plains Regional Service Commission, is building a facility that will explosion-dry blueberries for Association members. ERRC will supply the plans and advice, Sullivan says.

What to do with home canned foods that have frozen

LANCASTER — Do you have canned foods stored where they may freeze at the extremely low temperatures we are experiencing this winter? Even if they have never frozen before, it's a good idea to check your canned food frequently if there is any possibility it might freeze.

Home canned foods do not always have to be discarded if these safety rules are follows.

—If just a few jars of home canned foods are affected, prepare

and eat before contents have thawed.

—If the headspace in jars of home canned food is small—as when proper home canning techniques are used—the contents will expand upon freezing and lift lid from jar exposing a frozen area above jar top. If this happens, apply a layer of plastic food film or plastic freezer bag over the exposed area while frozen and seal tightly over edge of jar with a rubber band. Place jar of frozen

food in freezer. If the jar has not broken during the initial freezing it is unlikely to break during freezer storage. If the jar has broken, discard the jar and contents.

—If a large number of home canned food jars have frozen and it is impossible to refreeze contents as described above, or you do not have adequate freezer space, re-can foods following recommended home canning procedures as you would if foods were fresh. Process for full time.

Keep in mind that any canned food which has been re-canned will be of lesser quality in color, texture, flavor and vitamin retention.

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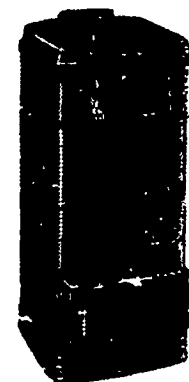
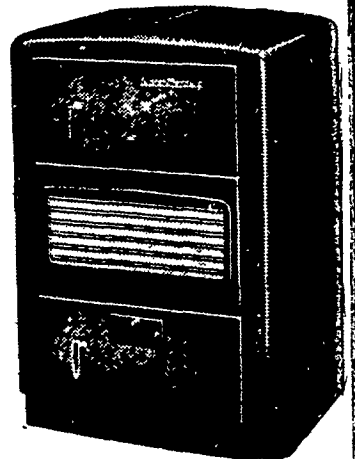
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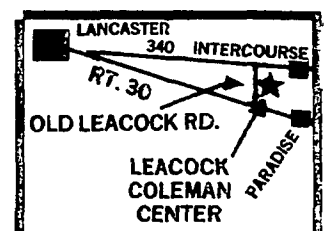


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